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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 002124

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SUBJECT: ECUADORIAN CONGRESS CENSURES ENVIRONMENT MINISTER

REF: A. QUITO 1779

B. QUITO 1758

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On September 13 the Ecuadorian Congress censured Environment Minister Ana Alban in absentia when she failed to appear at a previously-scheduled hearing -- the second of Correa's cabinet members to be censured in recent weeks. Despite a government statement of "total" support for the long-criticized minister, and her own public assurances that she will remain in office, rumors indicate that she may soon step down or be dismissed. A possible replacement is Planning Secretary Fander Falconi. End summary.

¶2. (U) Congress called for Minister Ana Alban to appear on September 13 to answer allegations of violating the Constitution through negligence and failure to stop illegal fishing in the Galapagos Islands, which UNESCO declared an endangered world patrimony in June. When Alban did not appear, a majority of legislators (57) voted to censure her in absentia. Alban, who was appointed by previous president Alfred Palacio in 2005, was retained by President Correa. Although seemingly well-intentioned, she has been a weak and ineffectual minister under both Palacio and Correa.

¶3. (U) Since early this year, criticism of Alban has increased, not only from environmentalists, but also from legislators. This year has seen several prominent embarrassments on the environmental front, including the assault of the Galapagos National Park Director by Air Force authorities in March, Correa's controversial shark fin decree about which Alban was not even consulted, the near-deportation in August of a U.S. environmentalist arrested for cooperating with environmental police on shark fin trafficking (ref A), followed by a reported increase in shark fishing overall, apparently due to Correa's legalization of & incidental8 shark catch in August. Galapagos Deputy Angel Vilema of the center right Union of Christian Democrats Party (UDC) called for Alban's censure, joining the other deputy from the Galapagos, Angel Yanez, of the center right Social Christian Party (PSC).

¶4. (SBU) Working-level contacts within the Ministry of Environment say that Alban has not been able to rally adequate budget for the enforcement of existing environmental laws, particularly in the area of logging. In the Congressional hearing, deputies accused her of also endangering the forest habitat of indigenous groups. Alban told the media on September 13 that she has not been able to effectively use the media to publicize the good things her ministry is doing. The Environment Ministry is traditionally weak and poorly funded; NGO contacts allege that eight mid-level provincial employees of the Ministry have been charged with corruption in the last year, but all remain in office. They say Alban's bland leadership has been ineffective in dealing with the Galapagos, byzantine local politics, which continue to complicate conservation.

¶5. (SBU) The censure motion does not carry legal

implications) Alban can continue to serve at the pleasure of President Correa. However, it does further weaken a minister who was already widely viewed as ineffective, leading to speculation that she could soon be removed from her position. (Note: shortly after Minister of Economy Ricardo Patino was censured, he was transferred to the newly-created Ministry of the Coast, ref B). One rumor is that Planning Secretary Fander Falconi will soon replace Alban.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Alban's censure brings to the fore her impotence as Minister of the Environment, which also highlights the Correa administration's ineffectual) some might even say poor) track record on environmental issues. That is ironic, given that environmentalists hold prominent positions in Correa's PAIS movement and in his government, notably top Constituent Assembly candidate and former Minister of Energy Alberto Acosta and Foreign Minister Maria Fernanda Espinosa. As so often happens in Ecuador, the demands of electoral politics and other competing interests seem thus far to have largely trumped the pro-environment inclinations of this government.

JEWELL